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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest discusses relevant issues and alternatives for rural school districts trying to develop strong programs for their most academically talented students. Although rural schools are more often constrained by high costs and material shortages than are urban schools, there are opportunities inherent in the lower teacher-student ratios and higher student involvement typical of small rural schools (Nachtigal, 1982). Programs for gifted students should address substantive academic goals, including: (1) bringing students' achievement closer to full potential; (2) ensuring that gifted students in outlying schools are identified and have access to appropriate services; and (3) improving access to advanced courses for talented high school students. Implementing rural gifted programs requires sensitive work with parents, other rural teachers and administrators, and with institutions other than the school district. A stable staff is necessary to assure rural parents and administrators that gifted programs are important and necessary (Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1986). While rural schools often lack resources needed for comprehensive gifted programs, program development is probably best expanded from an academic/acceleration model over a period of time (Howley, 1986). For elementary students, acceleration can be accomplished within the school through a wide variety of means. Networking with colleagues in a variety of settings can open up new opportunities for teachers and administrators to share resources, develop programs, and improve service delivery. Curriculum can be improved by linking with colleges, laboratories, or performing arts programs through electronic media, computers, and telecommunications networks. This digest offers several resource ideas for rural educators. It contains 10 references. (TES)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools April 1989

Building Academically Strong Gifted Programs in Rural Schools

Digest EDO-RC-89-3

RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS face a substantial task as they try to build strong programs for their most academically talented students. Recent reports indicate, however, that such programs **can** be developed in rural schools (for example, Luhman & Fundis, 1987). The aim of this Digest is to help rural practitioners understand the relevant issues and the available alternatives as they seek to improve the academic quality of gifted programs.

Characteristics of rural schools

Rural schools carry out their missions among unique opportunities and constraints. Among the constraints there are higher costs, a shortage of resource materials, and sparse population. In addition, the small size of rural schools means that differentiation of staff and students—on the urban model—is made more difficult. Staff must fill multiple roles, and each exceptionality (such as gifted education) is often represented by only a few students in each school.

The notable strengths of rural schools, however, include lower student-teacher ratios, greater opportunity for and expectation of student participation in a variety of activities, and more holistic relationships among students and teachers (Nachtigal, 1982).

Educators concerned with the design and implementation of academically strong gifted programs can accommodate these features of rural schools by asking:

- for what academic outcomes should we plan?
- what programs can help us realize these outcomes?
- how can we best use available resources to implement our programs?
- how can we evaluate student outcomes and program operation to win the support we need?

Academic outcomes

Although there is some dispute among experts about what gifted programs should include, the premise of this Digest is that programs for gifted students should address substantive academic goals, whatever their instructional or curricular design. Among the academic goals that such programs might include are the following (Howley, 1986):

- bringing gifted students' achievement (on individually-administered achievement tests) into closer proximity to their potential,
- ensuring that gifted students in outlying schools are identified and provided appropriate services, and
- providing better access to advanced courses for academically talented high school students.

Such goals can be realized in a comprehensive program (see, for example, Cox, Daniel & Boston, 1985) or they may be addressed in programs that follow a single model, for example: (1) acceleration with a focus on academic learning (Stanley, Luhman & Fundis), (2) cognitive process (Bloom, Guilford, Renzulli), and (3) career education (L. Fox, Van Tassel-Baska). Comprehensive programs address all three models simultaneously (Cox et al., 1985).

Realizing the goals: program concerns in rural context

Implementing programs to realize such goals as those suggested above, however, requires sensitive work with rural parents, other rural teachers and administrators, and with institutions other than the local school district.

For example, some rural parents will think that acceleration may harm their children socially, or that it will make participation in sports impossible. Some rural educators may feel—as a corollary to their need to fill multiple roles—that they must provide **all** direct services to students.

This latter view leads educators to deny the special needs of gifted students. For example, in 1972 Sydney Marland, U.S. Commissioner of Education at the time, reported to Congress that most principals believed their schools did not have **any** gifted students (Marland, 1972). Moreover, recent studies show that many rural teachers believe that gifted students do not need special programs (Anderson & Kleinsasser, 1987). Both views, though erroneous, are persistent (Gallagher, 1985), especially in rural areas (Anderson & Kleinsasser, 1987).

A stable staff, operating an effective academic program, is probably the key to dealing with such misconceptions (Howley, Howley & Pendarvis, 1986). Such a staff can help make two points to parents, teachers, and administrators; first, that gifted students are at-risk without special arrangements and, second, that gifted programs produce good results.

Resolving program concerns

According to Cox and colleagues (1985), comprehensive programs serve gifted students best. Rural schools, however, often lack the resources needed to establish a comprehensive program (Anderson & Kleinsasser, 1987).

In rural school districts, therefore, program development is probably best carried out step-by-step over a period of time, expanding toward comprehensiveness from a single-model base (Howley et al., 1986). Because substantial research has shown that acceleration is both cost-effective and instructionally effective, it is reasonable to begin program development in rural areas with the academic/acceleration model (Howley, 1986). Helping able youth move at their natural pace from kindergarten through professional school is far more effective than setting up holding operations to keep students age-in-grade-in-subject (Stanley, 1986).

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Progress towards academic goals is not difficult to measure, and the literature suggests that academically-based programs that provide for acceleration stand a good chance of success. Their success can help win supporters for gifted education, and a successful start can allow a program to become more comprehensive over time, while providing academically relevant services immediately.

Features of successful programs

For elementary students, acceleration can be accomplished within the school itself through a wide variety of means (see Gallagher, 1985). For secondary students, part-time or full-time early college entrance using recognized program models is helpful. Such programs include the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (Stanley's model at Johns Hopkins University and elsewhere) or College Studies for the Gifted (Luhman and Fundis's program at Fort Hays State University and elsewhere).

Rural educators, especially, should note that the latter program (established and directed by the authors of this Digest) is a validated program of the National Diffusion Network, and it is **based in a rural area**. Training and technical assistance to implement this model is available through the National Diffusion Network.

Although the successful alternatives just discussed are effective, they are not common in practice (Cox et al., 1985). Pull-out enrichment programs are a much more common (though more expensive and less effective) delivery system than acceleration (for example, Cox et al., 1985; Howley, 1986; Oglesby & Gallagher, 1983). The ineffectiveness of pull-out programs, however, can be ascribed to the extensive use of academically irrelevant activities, not to the fact that they remove children from regular classes (Stanley, 1986). Pull-out enrichment **can be improved** to provide a stronger academic program (Howley et al., 1986).

Other program concerns are important, too. Among these are issues of definition (who will be served and how will they be identified?); of learning environment (in which settings and by whom will services be delivered?); and parental involvement (what procedures will the program use to involve and educate parents?). Because they address such concerns, special education procedures (as outlined in Public Law 94-142), may help. Protection in assessment, parental involvement, and due process rights are the important features that need to be considered in resolving these concerns, especially when gifted programs are **not** administered according to the provisions of PL 94-142 (Howley et al., 1986).

Collaboration, networking, and using resources

Communicating and collaborating with colleagues who work in a variety of settings (that is, "networking") can open up new opportunities for teachers and administrators to share resources, develop programs, and to serve students better. Networking can also help relieve the sense of isolation and lonely struggle that rural educators—particularly teachers of the gifted—often report they feel.

Collaboration with colleges and universities can give students access to libraries, laboratories, performing arts programs, and advanced academic opportunities. College Studies for the Gifted, mentioned previously, is one model that capitalizes on such a relationship to provide gifted students in a rural area not only advanced academic opportunities, but a supportive social climate as well (Luhman & Fundis, 1987).

Electronic media, computer networks, and telecommunications can all serve as a vehicle to enrich curriculum—especially in mathematics, sciences, the performing arts, and foreign languages. Rural educators concerned with gifted students have the chance to help pioneer the use of technology to help all the students in their schools.

Rural educators who are concerned with gifted programs can also access the resources of the National Diffusion Network (National Dissemination Study Group, 1988), the ERIC network (including ERIC/CRESS and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted), the 9 Regional Educational Laboratories, and the 20 national research and development centers. To learn more about these programs, call the U.S. Department of Education at 800/424-1616 and ask for a copy of "Institutional Projects Funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)." The new Office of Gifted and Talented, U.S. Department of Education, is another resource. For more information write: United States Department of Education, OERI, Gifted and Talented Programs, Room 504, 555 New Jersey Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20208-5643.

Steady work

The development of academically strong programs for gifted students in rural schools is steady work. By focusing on meaningful academic goals, building support, and making wise use of available resources, gifted programs can thrive in rural schools.

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